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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2995
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2380
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SENSITIVE

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN AND SCA/PPD

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SUBJECT: Kyrgyz Media Embed in Afghanistan Counters Misinformation
about OEF

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1. (U) SUMMARY: Four Kyrgyz journalists were embedded June 21-27 in Afghanistan to allow them better to understand Coalition military and reconstruction efforts and the critical role of Manas Air Base in supporting those efforts. The journalists, who spent time at Bagram Air Base and a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Panjshir Province, saw evidence that the fighting continues, and they were impressed by the many reconstruction projects. One of the journalists confided, "Now that I understand what you are doing in Afghanistan, I think it is very important and I support you." The trip has resulted in several positive print articles and television coverage that directly contradict widespread negative coverage of Coalition operations in Afghanistan in Russian media. End Summary.

MEDIA EMBED TO COUNTER ANTI-BASE PUBLIC SENTIMENT

2. (SBU) Following on the June 2007 visit of Ambassador Yovanovitch and a six-member delegation of senior Kyrgyz officials to Afghanistan (Reftel), the Embassy's Public Affairs Section and the Manas Air Base helped to organize a similar trip for Kyrgyz journalists. Four Kyrgyz journalists traveled to Afghanistan June 21-27, accompanied by the DCM and post's Information Officer. The purpose of the trip was to show the journalists, and through them, the Kyrgyz public, the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, including the reconstruction efforts, so that they would better understand the importance of the Manas Air Base in supporting those efforts. Since the base's establishment in 2001, and particularly since a spate of incidents in 2006, including the shooting of a Kyrgyz citizen by a U.S. serviceman at Manas, Kyrgyz media coverage of the base has been largely critical and often based on misinformation drawn primarily from Russian media.

3. (U) Participating in the trip were Deputy Chief of Mission Lee Litzenberger; Information Officer Michelle Yerkin; Editor-in-Chief

of the Kyrgyz edition of "Komsomolskaya Pravda," Azamat Tynayev; correspondent with the most widely-read newspaper in Kyrgyzstan, "Vecerniy Bishkek," Azamat Kasybekov; correspondent with Kyrgyz National Television and Radio Company, the state channel and only nation-wide channel, Batyrbek Mamyrkulov; and Editor-in-Chief of an online information agency, "24.kg," Anton Lymar.

CULTURE SHOCK FOR THE KYRGYZ ON BAGRAM AIR BASE

14. (U) The Editor-in-Chief of the Kyrgyz edition of Komsomolskaya Pravda, who also hopes to publish articles about the embed in Moscow, described being in "culture shock" from the quality of life for Coalition service members at Bagram Air Base, a former Soviet base during the Soviet-Afghan War. He and the other journalists wrote in detail about the game rooms, cafeterias, and the irony that the main street at Bagram is now called "Disney Avenue." The other subject that enthralled the journalists was the large number of female service members deployed -- something unheard of in the former Soviet Union.

"THERE'S A WAR OUT THERE -- NOT TOO FAR AWAY"

15. (U) Despite the relative comfort and security of Bagram, the journalists quickly discovered that, as one wrote, "There's a war out there -- not too far away." After being briefed about the purpose and operations of Bagram Air Base and Regional Command East, the journalists visited the Craig Joint-Theater Hospital, where they learned that Coalition medical personnel treat everyone, including enemy combatants and civilian casualties. All four journalists subsequently wrote about the Children's Intensive Care Unit, where they saw several children with burns and a little girl recovering

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from a mine blast. (Note: When some of the journalists failed to mention that the mines that caused the injuries were old mines from the Soviet-Afghan War, the Public Affairs Section clarified this point and used the opportunity to provide information on Coalition and State Department demining programs. End Note.)

16. (U) Another reminder that we were in a war zone came on the first night of the trip, when the journalists witnessed a ceremony dedicated to a fallen Polish soldier. The tragedy served to reinforce that the fight is still on in Afghanistan and that the war on terror is a multinational effort.

PANJSHIR PROVINCE: INTO THE LION'S DEN

17. (U) The journalists were captivated by the opportunity to go to the Panjshir Valley, the only part of Afghanistan that successfully resisted Soviet control during the Soviet-Afghan War, despite nine Soviet offensives. It was during the Soviet-Afghan war that Ahmed Shah Massoud, leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance and Afghan national hero, became known as the "Lion of Panjshir." Much of the press coverage of the embed focused on Massoud's life and legacy. However, a lot of press was also devoted to the reconstruction efforts underway in Panjshir under the direction of the regional Provincial Reconstruction Team.

18. (U) A good example of the interconnection between security and economic development, the Panjshir Province, one of Afghanistan's safest provinces, has been called a "haven of prosperity in Afghanistan." The journalists were impressed by the relative safety of the Panjshir Valley, where they were allowed to take off their body armor and helmets and ride in unarmored SUV's. The Panjshir PRT took the journalists on site visits to schools, Afghanistan's first and only wind farm, and micro-hydroelectric stations which were built by the U.S. Department of Defense and other U.S. agencies. The journalists learned that in the past year, the PRT has built six new schools, four micro-hydroelectric plants, and five roads.

FORGING TIES BETWEEN TWO "STANS"

¶9. (U) Throughout the embed, the Kyrgyz journalists were struck by similarities between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. Geographically, the Panjshir Valley is very similar to parts of Kyrgyzstan. Likewise, the Kyrgyz could relate to some of the problems the Afghans face, such as difficulty in food processing and transport and the challenge of harnessing natural resources to produce electricity. Visiting a developing country with a worse economic situation than Kyrgyzstan prompted the journalists to ask how Kyrgyzstan could contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan and whether it would be possible for Kyrgyzstan to export electricity to Afghanistan.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The embed was a success, resulting in six positive print articles and glowing TV coverage to date. More coverage is expected in the weeks and months ahead. In a country where the U.S. military presence is widely perceived as evidence of U.S. imperialistic designs and a new Great Game, it is critical to get the message out about our mission in Afghanistan. In an often-hostile media environment, it was enormously gratifying to hear, as one journalist confided, "Now that I understand what you are doing in Afghanistan, I think it is very important and I support you."

¶11. (U) Embassy Bishkek would like to express its deep gratitude to the members of PRT Panjshir, the Media Operations Center in Bagram, and all the military and civilian personnel who supported this media embed and enabled us to help counter misinformation about

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coalition efforts in Afghanistan. Special thanks go out to LTC Adriane Craig, PAO, Manas Air Base; CPT Jerome Baysmore, Manas Air Base; Ben Lowenthal, PRT Director, Panjshir PRT; LTC Russell Kaskel, PRT Commander; CPT Jillian Torango, Information Officer, Panjshir PRT; and CPT Jennifer Martin of the Media Operations Center in Bagram.

LITZENBERGER